



Kimberly A. Foster
Executive Director

LOS ANGELES COUNTY COMMISSION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

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DR. HARRIETTE F. WILLIAMS

APPROVED MINUTES

The General Meeting of the Commission for Children and Families was held on Monday, **August 3, 2009**, in Room 739 of the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration, 500 West Temple Street, Los Angeles. **Please note that these minutes are intended as a summary and not as a verbatim accounting or transcription of events at this meeting.**

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT (Quorum Established)

Patricia Curry	Tina Pedersen
Ann Franzen	Martha Trevino Powell
Susan Friedman	Stacey Savelle
Helen Kleinberg	Adelina Sorkin
Dr. La-Doris McClaney	Dr. Harriette F. Williams
Steven M. Olivas, Esq.	

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT (Excused/Unexcused)

Carol O. Biondi	Sandra Rudnick
Rev. Cecil Murray	

I. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order by Chair Sorkin.

II. INTRODUCTIONS

Self introductions were made.

III. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

Action

Motion by Commissioner McClaney, seconded by Commissioner Williams, the Agenda for August 3, 2009 was unanimously approved.

IV. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- **July 20, 2009**

Action

Motion by Commissioner McClaney, seconded by Commissioner Savelle, the Minutes for July 20, 2009 were unanimously approved with corrections.

V. CHAIR'S REPORT

Chair Sorkin reported that last week she attended the Disproportionality Workgroup spearheaded by Casey Family Programs, with Judge Nash and Trish Ploehn serving as co-chairs. It is one of the "Breakthrough Series" throughout California addressing disproportionality and disparity.

Chair Sorkin briefly shared information from two reports provided as part of the Workgroup. The Rand Report, "Disparities Boys and Men of Color Face in California: How Large Are They and How Can We Address Them", addresses four domains: socio-economic, health, safety, and ready to learn as areas to monitor. Chair Sorkin stated that one area the report discusses is how California demographics do not match those of the rest of the nation especially in education. The second report by Hill, "Disproportionality and Disparity", addresses access to care. Chair Sorkin stated that if any Commissioner would like a copy of these reports, they should contact the Commission office. In response to the Chair's report, Commissioner Kleinberg stated that one area for discussion by this Workgroup might be the lack of resources for reunifications for minority children.

Chair Sorkin also reported on the DCFS Visitation Workgroup is moving forward to ensure that all Social Workers are trained on the new Visitation Policy. It is anticipated that a completed plan will be completed in four months.

The July 29, 2009 System Improvement Planning (SIP) meeting focused on the seventeen initiatives. The goal for this year, is to combine all plans prepared by DCFS into one plan. The purpose of SIP is to strengthen the accountability of California in monitoring and assessing the quality of services provided to children. In the Reunification Workgroup, participants felt that the Team Decision Making (TDM)s were the most helpful. However, the suggestion was made to combine meetings that parents are expected to attend for the multiple initiatives into one meeting. Commissioner Kleinberg stated that the Commission has expressed concern for years that visitation was not included in SIP, and as a result of the Commission's efforts, next year, visitation will be included.

Chair Sorkin announced that the Commission is invited to participate in the Commission for Women's 5K Run/Walk and 10K Run, "L.A. County Run for Health". Chair Sorkin also reminded the Commission that "All 4 The Love of Kids" is at the Arboretum on Thursday.

Chair Sorkin also announced that Dr. Astrid Heger will speak at tomorrow's Board of Supervisors (BOS) meeting on Item 2 (regarding enhancing DCFS management oversight of cases, implementing a pilot at the LAC+USC East San Gabriel Valley Medical Hub,

and a report back from DCFS, DMH, DHS, and the CEO at the August 25, 2009 Board meeting).

The Commission discussed its involvement with this issue. This includes the past recommendations that children be interviewed alone and the historical red flags such as male companions as well as multiple referrals.

Commissioner Friedman inquired of Director Ploehn whether the Commission should go first to DCFS with their recommendations after reviewing child fatality cases. Director Ploehn agreed that it would be a good first step. Commissioner Kleinberg suggested convening a discussion group with DCFS regarding DCFS actions as a result of the child fatalities mentioned in the L.A. Times.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Debra Reid, a mother whose son was killed in foster care 13 years ago, discussed issues of the safety of children in foster care and the lack of progress made in 13 years.

VI. EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Kimberly Foster, Executive Director provided a status report on AB12 that would extend Independent Living Program (ILP) services from age 18 to age 24. Ms. Foster informed the Commission that the Bill is currently on hold in the legislature due to the State budget.

Ms. Foster provided an update on the status of the Annual Report including input and approval received from the Chair. The report will include a section on the Commission's 25 year anniversary including the milestones. The Executive Director asked that Commissioners forward any recommendations or accomplishments to be included in the Annual Report.

Ms. Foster discussed the Commission's upcoming Election, and informed the Commissioners that relevant information was provided for them in their manila mail envelopes; and that one of the documents is marked confidential and should not be disseminated.

The Commission was also informed by the Executive Director that in response to the current fiscal challenges in the County she will seek input from DCFS and CEO regarding ways to manage Commission business and provide core services with fewer resources. She also reminded the Commission that the funding for the Commission comes from DCFS, and she welcomed the input of Commissioners regarding suggestions for saving cost.

Ms. Foster discussed the administrative limitations of the Commission office as it relates to preparing, submitting reports or documents that are in opposition to instruction from the Board of Supervisors. She reminded the Commission that the Commission Office functions in a similar manner to the Commission in that the Commission may not take a position in opposition to the Board of Supervisors. Commissioner Kleinberg requested that any limitations of the office be supported by written documentation.

The Commissioners discussed the various documents and reports received from the Commission Office and how it could be helpful to have the office highlight areas of interest to the Commission. In response to Commission concerns regarding e-mail contents and attachments, the Executive Director will provide a brief statement about relevant Board of Supervisors and Cluster Agenda items. In addition, the Executive Director indicated the analysis of reports, etc., would require considerable time, input on the specific area of focus in the report as different Commissioners have different requests. Commissioner Williams suggested that the Chair would make the determination and then communicate with the Executive Director regarding the matter of analyzing documents, etc., as this would be labor intensive.

The Executive Director informed the Commission of her request for a change in work schedule and informed them that they may contact her directly or her supervisor, Patrick Ogawa, if they have any additional questions or concerns. It was suggested that the Executive Committee place the matter on their agenda.

VII. DIRECTOR'S REPORT

Trish Ploehn, DCFS Director, discussed the recent death of the 6 yr. old boy that has been reported in the L.A. Times. A comprehensive investigation is in progress. She stated the issue of the quality of the investigations as well as the implementation of policies makes the difference regarding the outcomes for a child. The Department has instituted a higher level of review on unfounded investigations thus adding another layer of management reviewing these referrals.

Director Ploehn informed the Commission that a review of 500 emergency response referrals that span over a six month period will be reviewed by internal auditors. The review will be completed at the end of August. They are looking at issues such as: things that are being missed, questions not being asked, wrong decisions being made, are they looking at connections outside of the department and how are they using them, as well as, what are the good practices that can be shared throughout the department to achieve better outcomes. The findings will be analyzed and each office will implement a performance improvement program based on the outcome of each office's evaluation. In addition, they will redo another 500 audits early next year to see if they get different outcomes after implementing the performance improvements. Commissioner Savelle inquired whether this is an audit of records, and if the auditors were former Social Workers. Director Ploehn stated that the auditors are all former Social Workers, and at this point it is only an audit of records and maybe later, depending on the findings, that may change.

Chair Sorkin asked if Structured Decision Making (SDM) is being used 100% of the time and whether it is still DCFS policy to detain a child when safety is the issue and to open the case as voluntary when risk is involved. In addition, it was asked as to the timeframe for a Social Worker to investigate a referral. Director Ploehn stated that SDMs are being used 100% of the time, and usually when there is a Safety Assessment, there is imminent danger to the child and they must be removed, when there is a Risk Assessment, there is no imminent danger to the child but there is a potential for danger in the future and there are different levels of risk (high, low, very high) which would all be handled differently. She

also stated that the State mandate is 10 days to respond to a referral, but in Los Angeles County it is completed within 5 days for younger children considered to be more at risk.

Commissioner Friedman inquired if the person who calls the child abuse hotline is contacted, and the percentage of the calls that are anonymous. Director Ploehn stated that she does not know the percentage of anonymous calls and if the call is not anonymous, they do make a collateral contact to try to gather more information.

Director Ploehn reported that beginning this month the Emergency Response (ER) Academy, in conjunction with law enforcement agencies, will provide a 5 day extensive training program for ER workers, supervisors, and managers. Commissioner Kleinberg stressed that the ER Academy should train ER workers on how to speak to children. Director Ploehn stated that Eric Marts will be coming to the Commission in September to discuss the ER Academy in more detail.

Director Ploehn stated that she is expediting the SB 39 process, which will allow her to address inaccurate statements in the media about the child fatality case. When this process is completed, she will then be able to discuss it more fully.

With respect to the budget, Director Ploehn stated that \$19.1 million is being cut across the state in child welfare funds. Seventeen and a half million is L.A.'s share. Of that, \$232,000 is for Probation. Additional county cuts are expected. DCFS may be asked to use the waiver reinvestment funds to offset any cuts. DCFS will be working on the budget for the next 6-8 weeks and the revised County Budget will be out in September. In October, FFAs will experience a 10% cut. Vice Chair Curry suggested having two meetings with DCFS, one on the budget and one on the child fatality issues.

Commissioner Friedman inquired if Director Ploehn will be speaking before the Board at tomorrow's meeting and inquired if it was still correct that DCFS was short staffed and they would need an additional 1800 Social Workers to meet the 15:1 ratio for cases per worker. Director Ploehn stated that they are currently at a 25-32:1 ratio and are still under staffed.

VIII. PRESENTATION – CALIFORNIA FOSTER CARE OMBUDSMAN

Karen Grace-Kaho stated that the office of the State Foster Care Ombudsman was established by legislation in 2000 as an autonomous entity within the State Department of Social Services to provide a means for foster children to resolve issues related to their care, placement, and services, disseminate information on foster youth rights, maintain a toll-free help line, compile data and make it available to the legislature and the community, and investigate and attempt to resolve complaints. The Ombudsman Office has a unique website that was designed by a former foster child. Additionally, they have the authority to: investigate the acts of state and local administrative agencies, meet and communicate with any foster child in their placement or elsewhere, access any record of a state or local agency, and recommend case reassessments. However, they do not have the authority to: challenge court decisions, change case plans, or take personnel action. They are involved in collaborations with the: National Governor's Policy Institute on Emancipated Foster Youth; Child Welfare Council, California Permanency for Youth Project, Foster Youth Career Development and Employment Taskforce, California Foster Youth Education Task

Force, Guardianship Scholars Program, and the United States Ombudsman Association. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that the 3 pillars of the National Governor's Policy Institute are: education (graduation from high school), work experience (employment while in foster care), and a life-long connection.

Ms. Grace-Kaho provided the following statistical data regarding complaints received by her office from the highest to the lowest number of complaints: 1) relatives, 2) foster youth, 3) foster parents, 4) others, and 5) professionals. She also provided statistical data for complaints in Los Angeles County, the highest number of complaint calls come from: 1) youth, 2) parents, 3) relatives, 4) others, 5) foster care providers, and 6) foster care professionals. The most frequent complaint issues from May 2000-June 2009 are: 1) placement, 2) personal rights, 3) child welfare, 4) emancipation/ILP, and 5) medical/dental/mental. In Los Angeles County, the most frequent complaint issues are: 1) child welfare practices, 2) placement, 3) personal rights violations, 4) other, 5) emancipation/ILP, 6) abuse/neglect in placement, and 7) medical/dental/mental health.

Commissioner Friedman inquired if they investigate the safety of children being placed back with their family and if it is policy that foster parents are advised of court hearings. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated very few calls are received regarding reunification and every complaint received is referred to the child's attorney. Foster parents are notified of court hearings, but most do not attend. Chair Sorkin inquired about complaints regarding food. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that they do receive these types of complaints, such as locking a refrigerator. This is a big issue in group homes.

Commissioner Kleinberg asked about the nature of child welfare complaints/practices. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated these complaints are primarily from youth. Complaints include feeling they are not treated with respect, and feeling they are not believed when they have an issue. In addition, foster parents may have an issue but don't necessarily want the child removed. Commissioner Kleinberg also inquired about the complaints about placement. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that the majority of these complaints are from youth wanting to be placed with relatives and relatives wanting placement. She also stated that relatives are not notified at the beginning of the case, and at the time the relatives become aware they are told that the child has bonded with the foster family.

Vice Chair Pedersen asked if complaints are received about medications that children are receiving. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that at times they do receive complaints from children who feel they are being over-medicated and also children moving out of the county not being able to get the medications they need.

Ms. Grace-Kaho stated the following as examples of where child welfare is headed:

- Residential Based Reform - Los Angeles County is participating as a pilot county in the Residential Based Reform or group home reform. In this pilot, they will use group homes only as short term therapeutic intervention, then they will use family finding, try to place youth in a life long connection, and provide support services. She stated that in an effort to see not only the negative in group homes, she has been independently visiting group homes with good reputations throughout the state. She

stated that there is a group home in northern California that has a vegetable garden and a chef.

- Independent Living Program (ILP) Redesign – Through recommendations by the National Governor's Policy Institute it was discovered that the classroom model is not meeting the needs of the youth, it needs to be individualized. There are some breakthrough series programs that counties are working on to redesign this program.
- Fostering Connections Legislation – Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that AB 12 is an exciting new legislation that, among other things, proposes to add the requirement to notify relatives up front of a child entering foster care, and extending the age of care.

Vice Chair Curry stated that the Commission played a large role providing input for the legislation to create the State Foster Care Ombudsman's office and has worked with them throughout the years. A concern she has with group homes is that some Probation youth who are moved into residential treatment group homes are being released after 30 days even though they have serious mental health issues. She suggested that when making the rules for group homes that the rules are made to be flexible enough and individualized to meet the youth's needs. Ms. Grace-Kaho agreed and stated that there is a group home for sex offenders that keep the youth for 2-3 years because of the residual issues they are dealing with. She also stated that they are also working on addiction services for parents, as the majority of cases have issues with addiction.

Vice Chair Curry acknowledged Ms. Grace-Kaho for her work and stated that she hopes the Commission will work more closely with the Ombudsman's office in the future.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Ethel Barnes discussed the problems in foster care that are the same as 12 years ago. She stated that the county should be more observant and more aware of the issues and should make changes to ensure the safety of children.

Vice Chair Olivas requested clarification from County Counsel re Public Comment speakers discussing specific cases or their personal case information. Aleen Langton, County Counsel, stated that the public may discuss their specific case information but the Commission may not comment on specific cases. It was noted by Commissioner Kleinberg and Chair Sorkin that this Commission had received different instructions from County Counsel.

Debra Reid discussed the issues of foster care and the lack of follow-up to the child abuse hotline complaints. She suggested that the hotline give feedback on complaints to inform the callers that the issues have been resolved.

Mary Lee, a relative caregiver advocate, indicated her concerns regarding the Independent Living Program (ILP) process and the adoption program. She discussed the case of an adoptive youth whose adoptive mother passed away. He and his siblings went to live with the son of the adoptive mother and when he turned 18 years old, was told to leave. He has no high school diploma, nowhere to go, and is a high risk. He was told he was not

scheduled for ILP services. Her concerns included the lack of communication at the time the adoptive mother passed away and the lack of transition support services for the youth.

Follow-Up

Chair Sorkin suggested Ms. Lee speak to the Commission's DCFS liaison, Cassandra Turner, regarding her concerns.

IX. PRESENTATION – DCFS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT SERVICES OMBUDSMAN

Onitsha Thompson, DCFS Ombudsman, provided a general overview of DCFS' Youth Development Services (YDS) Ombudsman Office. The YDS Ombudsman identifies gaps and weaknesses within the ILP system and submits reports and recommendations to the YDS Division Chief. The reports and tracking utilized are: Intake Form, Case Report, Monthly Complaint Log (complaints closed within 1 week), Case Log, and Monthly Report. She informed the Commission of the YDS Ombudsman's office responsibilities:

1. Respond to complaints of foster youth/probation foster youth as it relates to ILP service delivery and the availability of services. The top complaints received are regarding: housing, employment, education, medical, documentation, transportation, ILP eligibility, and check disbursement.
2. Facilitate housing appeals when youth are facing eviction from the Transitional Housing Program (THP) and the Transitional Housing Plus Program (THP+).
3. Respond to requests for information from youth and the public.
4. Organize and coordinate the Annual Celebration II event for the YDS Division.
5. Organize and facilitate Youth Focus Groups and Speak Outs for foster youth/probation foster youth.
6. Assist with the recruitment of youth participants for the following: Foster Youth Career Fairs sponsored by the Board of Supervisors, Conferences, Focus Groups and other youth related activities.
7. Assist with requests for (ILP eligible youth) registration, transportation, lodging, and the planning process for the Los Angeles Chapter local issue; and assist foster youth/ Probation foster youth in understanding their rights.
8. Update the Foster Youth/Probation Foster Youth Speaker's Bureau roster and training curriculum.
9. Participate in meetings and on committees to help ensure youth and alumni engagement.

In addition, Ms. Thompson informed the Commission that YDS prepares an Annual Report. She also stated that since 2005, the calls to YDS Ombudsman have tripled. This is an indication that more and more youth are learning about the YDS Ombudsman through the ILP website and many youth either call or walk-in the office.

Ms. Thompson stated that the YDS Division Chief reviews and approves the Annual Report before finalization and distribution. Vice Chair Curry suggested the Ombudsman's structure be reviewed to have more distance between the Ombudsman and the YDS Division Chief for the purpose of the Annual Report.

Commissioner Kleinberg inquired about training for Social Workers to help them understand youth when they say they are not being respected or no one believes what they are saying. Ms. Grace-Kaho stated that there is a Youth Training Project by the Training

Academy in the Bay Area that has trained foster youth to train Social Workers and Supervisors and could be requested in L.A. County. Ms. Thompson stated that the California Youth Connection (CYC) Los Angeles Chapter is currently working on a curriculum to present to the Academy on services available for youth. Commissioner Savelle suggested using Social Workers that are former foster youth to train other Social Workers. Commissioner Kleinberg suggested forming an Ad Hoc Committee to research the issue of training for Social Workers by former foster youth.

Commissioner Williams inquired about the availability of “stimulus” funds for youth services. Rhelda Shabazz, YDS Division Chief stated that no stimulus funds are coming in directly to DCFS, as Community and Senior Services is one of the leads. She further stated they are working closely with Community and Senior Services and L.A. City Community Development Department ensuring that youth are aware of the available summer jobs by sending out flyers to all group homes, FFAs, relative caretakers, and foster homes. There are approximately 300 youth working in the City and 130 in the County.

Chair Sorkin inquired if the foster youth are advised about legislation that affects them and their rights such as AB 490 regarding education and AB 1331 regarding SSI. Ms. Thompson stated that the youth are advised of legislation and last year they had a focus group on AB 490 to inform the foster care youth of their education rights and once they understand their rights, how to go to the schools and implement them. In the Pomona Unified School District, the department is working with the administrative staff to develop a smooth transition. They are now working to implement this in other school districts.

X. PUBLIC COMMENTS

Trina Williams, a member of the Inglewood School Board addressed the Commission regarding the high percentage of children in the Inglewood School District and the desire to collaborate with DCFS and help facilitate visitation as well as to ensure that the educational needs of the children are met. She stated that one of the schools in her district has a 70% foster child population. She stated that the Inglewood School District is very willing to collaborate with DCFS and that she has also stated that she previously worked with churches to identify possible locations for a visitation center in response to the DCFS need but there has been no follow-up. She also stated that the county should bring in more resources to educate foster children and incorporate stronger accountability.

Follow-Up

Commissioner Williams suggested Ms. Williams speak to Cassandra Turner, DCFS liaison to the Commission, regarding churches as visitation centers and requested a report back. Chair Sorkin stated that she would update Commissioner Williams on the contacts Ms. Williams has had with the Faith-Based Committee regarding churches as visitation centers.

Debvin Mitchell, a former foster child whose brother died in foster care spoke of the negligence of the foster caregiver and the Social Workers in the death of his brother while his brother was placed in foster care. He informed the Commission that he was also abused while in foster care, and not believed by the Social Worker until his mother stepped in on his behalf. He is now an advocate for abused foster children and would like to participate on a Committee to address these issues.

XI. ANNOUNCEMENTS

There were no announcements.

XII. ADJOURN

The meeting was adjourned by Chair Sorkin.